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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 000335

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [NP](#)

SUBJECT: NEPAL: PM DAHAL MAKES CASE TO DIPLOMATIC CORPS ON
FIRING ARMY CHIEF

REF: A. KATHMANDU 329

[1](#)B. KATHMANDU 325

[1](#)C. KATHMANDU 320

Classified By: Ambassador Nancy J. Powell. Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Early on April 23, Prime Minister Pushpa Dahal briefed selected members of the diplomatic corps, including Ambassador Powell, on why the Government of Nepal (GON) was considering removing Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Rookmangud Katawal. PM Dahal denied that his Maoist party had any hidden or dictatorial agenda. The GON's main concern was civilian supremacy, something which the Army chief had never accepted. The Finnish representative and the Norwegian Ambassador emphasized the importance of political party dialogue and expressed concern about the impact of the minor issue of the COAS on the peace process. The Indian Ambassador stressed that conclusion of the peace process and drafting of the new constitution required party consensus. Ambassador Powell agreed that civilian supremacy was a bedrock of democracy but added that this authority had to be exercised responsibly, which did not appear to be the case now. The British Ambassador noted that in the British system the Ministry of Defense developed overall military policy, but operational matters such as retirements were left to the British Army. Dahal insisted he was committed to the peace process and political consensus. At close of business April 23, the cabinet had not made a final decision.

Dahal Defends Steps Against Chief of Army Staff

[1](#)2. (C) At a 45-minute morning meeting on April 23 at his residence, Prime Minister Pushpa Dahal explained to selected members of the diplomatic corps why the Government of Nepal (GON) was considering removing General Rookmangud Katawal as Chief of Army Staff (COAS). The Finnish Deputy Chief of Mission (on behalf of the European Union) and the Ambassadors of Norway, the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Germany and Japan attended, as did Finance Minister and senior Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai and the PM's Foreign Policy Adviser Hira Thapa. The PM stated that he had called the meeting to ensure communication at a delicate moment in the political transition when many rumors about Maoist

intentions were circulating. Dahal denied that his Maoist party had a hidden agenda to capture the Nepal Army and seize complete power. The Maoists were committed to democratic norms and the peace process. He insisted that the Government of Nepal's main concern was civilian supremacy. Dahal said that the COAS had repeatedly challenged civilian control and had never been comfortable with the peace process. The GON had taken its steps to make clear that there is one, unitary civilian power in Nepal, not two.

Finn and Norwegians Voice Concern

13. (C) The Finnish representative emphasized the importance of cooperation among the political parties and political stability in support of the peace process. The Norwegian Ambassador concurred and added that the Maoists needed to be in dialogue with all the parties on how to handle the Army. He was concerned about the impact of this controversy -- over what he regarded as a minor issue -- on the major issue of peace.

Indian Ambassador Pushes For Focus on Principal Issues

14. (C) Indian Ambassador Sood expressed regret that the issue of the Army chief had been dominating all other political considerations in recent days. In his view, the GON faced two principal issues: conclusion of the peace process and drafting of the new constitution. Both issues required party

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cooperation and consensus if they were going to move forward.

India did not want to see developments that would break up consensus. Sood said his government was in complete support of the principle of civilian authority, and understood the GON's request to the Chief for a clarification on three issues as a manifestation of that principle. But now the challenge was to re-establish a consensual spirit on how the GON would exercise its authority.

U.S. Supports Civilian Leadership, Questions Timing

15. (C) Ambassador Powell re-affirmed that civilian control of the Army was a bedrock principle for the U.S. and all democracies. However, this authority had to be exercised responsibly. In the case of the public charges against General Katawal, two of the issues (Army recruitment and extension of the brigadier generals) were pending before the Supreme Court. The Court, in the U.S. view, needed to be given a chance to make its decision. The third issue (participation in the National Games) frankly did not rise to the level to justify endangering the peace process by firing the Chief. Past actions by Katawal had called into question his respect for civilian rule, but it was not clear why the GON was pushing to remove him now.

UK Ambassador Describes British Approach

16. (C) British Ambassador Hall pointed out that it was up to the Nepalis to decide who would serve as Army chief; that was not the UK's business. The trouble lay with the impact on consensus and the peace process. Hall said the definition of civilian authority mattered. In the British system, the Ministry of Defense set defense policy, but the British Army was responsible for looking after operations -- such as retirements and participation in games. The British Ambassador argued that Katawal could not be an obstacle to the peace process if there was political consensus.

Dahal Responds

17. (C) PM Dahal expressed appreciation for the diplomatic

corps and reiterated his commitment to seeking consensus. In response to a question from the Indian Ambassador, he said he would seek consensus first within the cabinet, but also with the opposition. He and Finance Minister Bhattarai re-affirmed that the Maoists had no intention of abandoning the peace process and requested continued support from the international community. He answered Ambassador Powell's question on application of a 30-year career rule (recently applied to the Nepal Police and the Armed Police Force) by saying it was GON policy not to apply this to the Nepal Army.

Comment

18. (C) At close of business April 23, numerous intra and inter-party consultations on the issue of removing General Katawal were under way in Kathmandu. Communist Party of Nepal - United Marxist Leninist (UML) President Jhalanath Khanal returned to the capital earlier in the day, but the UML is not expected to issue a statement of its position until April 24. The cabinet has yet to meet again. In his meeting with the diplomatic corps, PM Dahal seemed to be taken aback by the level of opposition he has encountered. Indian Ambassador Sood told Ambassador Powell early April 22 that he expected Katawal to be replaced later that same day. UN Mission in Nepal chief Karin Landgren, who met the PM ahead of the ambassadors, described him as "confident." Given the Maoists' record of recent missteps, no course of action can be ruled out.
POWELL